UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT

Twin Falls District
Jarbidge Field Office
2536 Kimberly Road
Twin Falls, ID 83301

Scoping Information Package
Saylor Creek Herd Management Area
Wild Horse Release and Fuel Breaks

NEPA No. DOI-BLM-ID-T010-2011-0001-EA.

This information package summarizes a Bureau of Land Management (BLM) proposal to release 50-75 wild horses into the Saylor Creek Herd Management Area (HMA) after vegetation recovers from four wildfires. During summer 2010, four wildfires burned approximately 57,100 acres (68% BLM, 56% all ownership) within the Herd Management Area, including the preferred area or "home range" of the horses. On August 27, 2010, the Twin Falls District Manager authorized an emergency gather of all the horses in the Herd Management Area. These 192 horses are currently being held at the Idaho BLM, Boise Wild Horse Corrals.

This proposal is in accordance with the 1987 Jarbidge Resource Management Plan. Federal actions must be analyzed in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and other relevant Federal and State laws and regulations to determine potential environmental consequences.

The purpose of this report is to inform interested and affected parties of this proposal and to solicit comments to assist with the NEPA review of the proposal. Analysis of the proposal is ongoing, and will be documented in an Environmental Assessment (EA) with an estimated completion date of December 1, 2010. Comments received in response to this solicitation will be used to identify potential environmental issues related to the proposed action and to identify alternatives to the proposed action that meet the purpose of and need for the project.

Purpose and Need for Action

The BLM must determine when and how many wild horses to return to the Saylor Creek Herd Management Area. As a result of wildfires during summer 2010, the wild horses were gathered and are temporarily being held at the Boise Wild Horse Corrals.

The BLM will identify criteria to determine when the vegetation has recovered sufficiently to sustain grazing by wild horses.

Frequency and size of wildfires has increased within the HMA and adjoining rangelands. In the past 5 years, BLM has conducted two emergency wild horse gathers as a result of wildfires burning large portions of the HMA. To better protect the health of the wild horses and

rangelands within the HMA, the BLM needs to create fuel breaks. The proposed fuel breaks are intended to facilitate fire suppression activities by slowing fire progression, to protect the horses' home range from fire and to reduce subsequent emergency gathers. The fuel breaks would also serve to protect BLM's investment in fire rehabilitation seedings.

Existing Condition

Prior to the 2010 wildfires, the vegetation within the HMA consisted primarily of non-native perennial (54%), annual grasslands (27%), and native grass and shrublands (19%). In non-native perennial areas, the dominant vegetation was crested wheatgrass (*Agropyron cristatum*), with a less dominant presence of Sandberg's bluegrass (*Poa secunda*). Invasive and annual grasses and forbs are present in non-native perennial grasslands, but not dominant. In annual plant communities the dominant vegetation is primarily cheatgrass (*Bromus tectorum*). In native areas, the dominant vegetation was Wyoming big sagebrush (*Artemesia tridentata wyomingensis*) and Sandberg bluegrass with a minimal presence of annual grasses and forbs. Approximately 68% of the HMA was burned in 2010 wildfires. Portions of the burned areas are expected to recover naturally. Areas where burn severity was high are not expected to recover naturally; these areas (approximately 23,319 acres) will be seeded in accordance with Long Butte Wildfire Emergency Stabilization (ES) and Burned Area Rehabilitation (BAR) Plans.

Resource monitoring information (2006 production data, actual use, and utilization) indicates that the Saylor Creek HMA produces enough forage to support more than 50 horses while maintaining the current authorized level of domestic livestock grazing.

Proposed Action

Wild Horses

The BLM proposes to release 50-75 wild horses into the Saylor Creek Herd Management Area once the vegetation has recovered from the four wildfires (Dove Springs, Flint, Long Butte, and Saylor Cap) that occurred during summer 2010. In order to slow the population growth rate and extend the time between gather cycles, a sex ratio of 60:40 in favor of males will be used and all mares released will be treated with fertility control (*Porcine zona pellucida* PZP). Horses selected for release will vary in age from two years to more than 15 years. All horses not selected for release back to the HMA will be available for adoption or sent to long-term holding facilities.

Release of wild horses will be subject to vegetation recovery/grazing reintroduction criteria described in the Long Butte ES and BAR plans. BLM expects portions of the lightly burned areas to recover quickly and allow the release of some horses as early as the summer 2011. In areas that are seeded, it may take an additional year or longer before vegetation recovers/establishes sufficiently to sustain grazing by wild horses. The number of horses that would be released will be subject to forage availability within those areas determined to meet reintroduction criteria. Remaining horses would be released as recovery and forage availability permits.

In burned areas closed to grazing, the following criteria from the Long Butte ES and BAR plans would be used to determine when vegetative recovery is sufficient to resume grazing:

1. Over 50% of desired herbaceous perennial plants are producing seed.
2. Qualitative monitoring observations indicate that the entire plant community has developed root systems sufficient to provide soil stabilization and withstand grazing when soils are moist.
3. Total ground cover is greater than 80% of what is expected on the range site. Ground cover expected on the site is based on cover data collected prior to the fire. If no site-specific data exists, then comparable reference sites or site potential estimates based on range site descriptions would be used.
4. For areas seeded with a grass and forb mix as proposed in this plan, 40% of the total cover must be composed of species contained in the applied seed mix or other desirable native perennial grass and forb species that have recovered since the fire.

Fuel Breaks

In addition, the BLM is proposing a pilot project to create 12 miles of 300 to 600-foot wide Immigrant forage kochia fuel breaks in and near the Saylor Creek HMA (see Map 1). The intent of these fuels breaks is to aid fire suppression efforts in limiting the size and severity of future wildfire which will (1) better protect the horses' home range within the HMA, (2) better protect existing and restored rangelands from future wildfires and (3) reduce the probability of another emergency gather in the near-future. Historically, the majority of fire direction of spread has been from the north, traveling in a southeasterly direction. The fuel breaks are designed to interconnect with fuel breaks in the Long Butte ES&BAR Plan and would bisect the HMA north-south in and near the wild horses' home range, offering increased protection from a typical wildfire start and direction of spread. The fuel break design is based in part on a project underway in the neighboring Burley Field Office (ID-220-2008-EA-225).

The proposed fuel breaks also cross Idaho Department of Lands (IDL) administered lands and private land. The pilot project includes the cooperative involvement of IDL and the private landowner.

Forage kochia is a long-lived, perennial semi-shrub used extensively on arid to semiarid rangelands that have sandy clayey textured soils, are moderately to strongly alkaline and receive 6 to 14 inches of annual precipitation (Harrison et al., 2002). Forage kochia is one of the few plants that will establish in extremely harsh conditions when other seedings fail and will compete with cheatgrass, halogeton, and other annual weeds such as tumble mustard (Harrison et al, 2000). Plants remain green and succulent through late summer (primary fire season) and reduce cheatgrass biomass therefore reducing fine fuels (Waldron and Smith, 2010). Pellant (1994) reported that in August, forage kocia had 4 times and 10 times the moisture content of crested wheatgrass and cheatgrass, respectively.

Trials by Monsen (1994) found that Immigrant forage kochia demonstrated excellent utility as a greenstrip species. Monsen and Memmott (1999) reported that with wind speed at 16.3 mph the test fire burned 2 feet into test strips and went out. When wind speed exceeded 20-25 mph, and plots contained litter, the fire burned slowly and erratically through the forage kochia plots.

Additionally, forage kochia has value as forage for cattle, sheep, horses and wildlife. Research and experience have shown that forage kochia is a palatable and nutritious shrub, especially during the fall and winter when nutritional quality of other plants within the HMA is low. Its nutritional characteristics include CP levels above the 70 g/kg needed for ruminant animals, acceptable fiber levels, low tannins and oxalates, and improved digestion kinetics when mixed with the low quality diets common during late summer, fall, and winter months within the planning area (Waldron et al 2010a).

Preliminary Issues

The current land use plan (1987 Jarbidge Resource Managemnet Plan) calls for an Appropriate Management Level (AML) of 50 horses. The BLM released 98 horses in the spring of 2006 following the 2005 fires. These horses quickly moved into the rehabilitated home range and were detrimental to the success of the ES and BAR seeding efforts. BLM is concerned that premature release of the horses to the HMA prior to achievement of vegetation recovery objectives identified in the Long Butte ES and BAR plans may negatitively impact the health of the rangelands and the ability of the HMA to sustain the horses over the long-term. The horses that were gathered in 2005 and released in 2006 and again gathered in 2010 showed signs of not being wild in nature. The BLM is also concerned that if the horses remain in holding beyond spring of 2012, their wild and free roaming nature may be lost.

Public concerns have been expressed about allowing both wild horse and domestic livestock grazing in the same area. Some suggest that all horses should be removed; while others suggest that all livestock and associated infrastructure should be removed.

Public concerns have been expressed that seeded forage kochia may migrate into the surrounding plant community. Studies by Harrison and others (2000) reported very limited spread outside initial treatments. However, the same reference reported that forage kochia spread into small playas and slickspots near Kuna, Idaho.

Preliminary Alternative Development

At this time the BLM is considering three alternatives in addition to the proposed action.

No Action
The No Action alternative would not release any wild horses into the Saylor Creek HMA and would not create any fuel breaks. The 192 horses currently in the BLM Boise holding facility would either be placed into private care or long-term holding facilities.

Alternative 2
BLM is considering an alternative that would release approximately 100-165 wild horses back into the Saylor Creek HMA, no earlier than the spring of 2012. These horses would be held in a BLM facility until released and the remaining horses would be placed into private care or long-term holding facilities. In order to slow the population growth rate and extend the time between gather cycles, a sex ratio of 60:40 in favor of males would be used and all mares released would

be treated with fertility control (*Porcine zona pellucida* PZP). Horses selected for release will vary in age from two years to more than 15 years.

This alternative would create the 12 miles of forage kochia fuel breaks described in the Proposed Action and an additional 20 miles of fuel breaks. The fuel breaks would provide additional protection to the home range and restoration efforts by bisecting the HMA east-west as well as north-south, as described in the Proposed Action (see Map 1).

Alternative 3

The BLM is also considering an alternative that would release 50-75 wild horses, no earlier than the spring of 2012. These horses would be held in a BLM facility until released and the remaining horses would be placed into private care or long-term holding facilities. BLM would not create forage kochia fuel breaks.

Conformance with the Land Use Plan

The 1987 Jarbidge RMP (p. II-4) identifies that one wild horse herd, Saylor Creek, will be managed under the approved plan. The Saylor Creek HMA would be managed to support 50 wild horses. The BLM will follow the direction provided in the 1987 RMP in crafting its range of alternatives in this EA.

The Jarbidge RMP is currently under revision (see http://www.blm.gov/id/st/en/prog/planning/jarbidge_resource.html). A Draft RMP was released in September 2010. Various alternatives related to management of the Saylor Creek HMA are being considered as part of the RMP effort. The alternatives range from an unpopulated HMA to managing for a non-reproducing herd of up to 600 horses. If you wish to comment on the overall management of the Saylor Creek HMA in the Draft RMP, comments should be directed to the RMP revision effort. The comment period for the RMP revision effort is open until Janurary 31, 2011. Comments can be submitted electronically (ID_Jarbidge_RMP@blm.gov) or in writing to the following address:

Jarbidge Field Office
Attn: Aimee Betts
Bureau of Land Management
2536 Kimberly Road
Twin Falls, ID 83301

None of the alternatives being considered in this EA would preclude the options being considered under the Jarbidge RMP revision.

Decision to be Made

The Jarbidge Field Manager will decide whether to release horses back into the Saylor Creek HMA. Part of his decision will determine when and how many horses will be released.

The BLM has decided to conduct emergency stabilization and rehabilitation activities within the HMA. Additionally, the Field Manager will determine whether to supplement the Long Butte and other ES and BAR plans with fuel breaks in order to protect the horses' home range from frequent wildfires and subsequent emergency gathers.

Public Input Needed

Comments are specifically requested on the proposed action, preliminary issues, and alternatives. Comments made on this proposal would be most helpful if they are received by November 22, 2010, and are directly relevant to the proposal and project area. The BLM will not reject public feedback outside established public involvement timeframes; however, these comments may be considered secondary to comments received in a timely manner and may only be assessed to determine if they identify concerns that would substantially alter the assumptions, proposal, design, or analysis presented in the EA.

Written comments must be submitted to Rick Vander Voet, Field Manager, Jarbidge Field Office, 2536 Kimberly Road, Twin Falls, ID 83301. The office business hours for submitting hand-delivered comments are 8:00 am to 4:30 pm Monday through Friday, excluding holidays. Electronic comments must be submitted in a format such as an email message, plain text (.txt), rich text format (.rtf), Word (.doc), or portable document format (.pdf) to id_jarbidge_fo@blm.gov. E-mails submitted to e-mail addresses other than the one listed, in other formats than those listed, or containing viruses will be rejected. To be most helpful, comments sent electronically should include the title of this project "Saylor Creek Wild Horse Release" in the subject line. Please identify whether you are submitting comments as an individual or as the designated spokesperson on behalf of an organization. Issues that are outside the scope of the proposal will not be addressed.

Before including your address, phone number, e-mail address, or other personal identifying information in your comment, be advised that your entire comment, including your personal identifying information, may be made publicly available at any time. While you can ask us in your comment to withhold from public review your personal identifying information, we cannot guarantee that we will be able to do so.

The primary contact for questions and comments for this analysis is Ken Crane, Supervisory Rangeland Management Specialist, 2536 Kimberly Road, Twin Falls, ID 83301, or (208) 736-2369.

Attachment:

Map 1 Proposed Fuel Breaks - Saylor Creek Herd Management Area

References

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